

REVIEW

by

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of

the dissertation of Borislav Yordanov Dichev,
doctoral student in the Individual Study Program at the Faculty of History,
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on the topic

“THE BULGARIANS IN AEGEAN AND WESTERN MACEDONIA DURING THE SECOND WORLD WAR”

for the acquisition of the educational and scientific degree **Doctor**
in Professional Field 2. Humanities,
Specialty 2.2. History and Archaeology,
Scientific Specialty “History of Bulgaria”

Borislav Dichev is not an unknown name in Bulgarian historical scholarship. His publications speak best for him. Having graduated in 1986, he has preserved throughout the following decades his vivid interest in Bulgarian history, particularly in its dynamic and even fateful modern periods. It was therefore no surprise when he took steps towards defending a doctoral dissertation. Presenting the doctoral candidate here is necessary not only for the formal requirements of a dissertation review, but also in order to trace his long-standing engagement with themes related to Modern Bulgarian History.

In this light, the choice of dissertation topic – “The Bulgarians in Aegean and Western Macedonia during the Second World War” – appears entirely logical. He prepared it as an independent doctoral candidate at the Department of Bulgarian History, Faculty of History, Sofia University, under the supervision of one of the leading experts in Modern Bulgarian History – Prof. DSc Veselin Yanchev.

Formulated as such, the dissertation topic requires knowledge not only of Bulgaria’s political development, but also of the situation in Aegean and Vardar Macedonia, of international relations during the Second World War, and of the progress of military operations on the fronts.

It must also be stressed – something by no means negligible – that only a few historians have turned their attention to this problem, and that mostly in recent decades. Some questions

covered in Borislav Dichev's dissertation have been addressed before, but this does not diminish the necessity of a comprehensive study.

The dissertation consists of an introduction, two main parts (each divided into three chapters), a conclusion, sources and bibliography – 421 pages in total.

The introduction is extensive and includes the obligatory elements: structure, chronological boundaries, and source base. In it, Dichev provides a thorough historiographical overview, demonstrating his awareness of the research conducted on the subject—an indispensable prerequisite for the successful development of the dissertation. The introduction also clearly outlines the aims and objectives of the study, which, I can state already here, have been successfully achieved.

The main goal is to investigate and present the situation of the Bulgarian population in Aegean and Western Macedonia during 1941–1944, under the German-Italian occupation regime and the local collaborationist administration.

Part A follows the anxieties, aspirations, and actions of the Bulgarian population in Aegean Macedonia, which was under German and Italian control. Chapter One examines the hardships of the Bulgarians after April 1941, their deceived hopes for change following Greece's capitulation, and the vacillations in German and Italian policy. The important role of Bulgarian liaison officers and interpreters—as intermediaries both with the occupiers and with Sofia—is duly emphasized. Particularly interesting is the Italian attempt in spring 1943 to form in the Kastoria region a Bulgarian volunteer defense unit against the Greek resistance. Well demonstrated is the subsequent shift after Italy's capitulation, which forced the Germans to occupy the former Italian zone, bringing some improvements for the Bulgarian population there. Notably, the author does not restrict himself strictly to the set chronological frame, but briefly reviews developments in autumn 1944, when persecutions against Bulgarians resumed under the restored Greek authorities.

Chapter Two is devoted to the Bulgarians' efforts to restore their educational network. Detailed are both their aspirations to open schools and the collaborationist Greek authorities' attempts to prevent this. The Italian occupation authorities were unambiguously negative, while the Germans, unwilling to provoke Greek nationalist sentiment, also obstructed the effort. Sofia's diplomatic efforts to overcome the obstacles are extensively analyzed.

Chapter Three examines the attempts to restore Bulgarian church structures. It is shown how the complex German and Italian policies had repercussions on the ecclesiastical situation of

the Macedonian Bulgarians. Nevertheless, two Bulgarian churches opened in Thessaloniki, and in many places liturgies were held in Bulgarian. The Holy Synod of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church invested considerable administrative and financial resources, though its position remained delicate and politically constrained.

Part B investigates the Bulgarian population in Western Macedonia, first under Italian authority, supportive of the Albanian puppet government, and after summer 1943 under German military rule.

Chapter One highlights Italy's policy of denying the existence of Bulgarians and favoring Albania's territorial claims. The Bulgarian government stalled negotiations with Italy over demarcation lines, arguing that wartime borders were temporary. This chapter is heavy with tragic accounts of abuses by Albanians against Bulgarians, with Italy's systematic policy being to expel or assimilate the Bulgarians. Particularly noteworthy is Dichev's observation of Italy's attempts to promote the idea of a "Macedonian population" and of an autonomous Macedonia under Italian protection.

Chapters Two and Three parallel those in Part A, dealing with educational and church matters. They illustrate the extreme difficulties faced by Bulgarians in the Italian zone—schools being impossible, while church activity, though limited, was still permitted. Here I would pose a question to the candidate: How does he explain the discrepancy between the prohibition of schools and the tolerance of Bulgarian priests?

The conclusion corresponds well with the body of the dissertation, summarizing the processes and events and demonstrating the candidate's ability to derive clear findings from detailed analyses.

The bibliography lists almost 40 works, correctly cited in the text. Some questions may be raised, however, about whether all listed works qualify as scholarly editions. The "Short History of Bulgaria" (1983) hardly fits this category.

The source base is impressive – 24 archival fonds from four archives, complemented by published documents, memoirs, and diaries. This testifies to Dichev's seriousness as a researcher. Yet, for unclear reasons, the fonds in the Central State Archives are not arranged in numerical order.

Some criticisms can be made. The scholarly apparatus leaves room for improvement. The chapter titles are overly long. Repetitions remain despite revision. Minor factual inaccuracies are

present—for example, the puppet Greek premier appears alternately as “Cholakoglou” and “Tsolakoglou” (p. 136). Most importantly, the dissertation relies almost exclusively on Bulgarian sources, which inevitably affects its conclusions. Greater attention to non-Bulgarian sources would improve objectivity.

Nevertheless, the strengths of the work far outweigh its weaknesses. The massive archival base, the contextualization within the Second World War, the chapter summaries, and the detailed study of Bulgarians’ struggles for schools, churches, cultural institutions, identity, and participation in local governance—all deserve praise. Valuable too is the analysis of Bulgarian state policies, including those of the ministries and the Holy Synod, sometimes diverging from the state line.

There is no question of plagiarism. The dissertation is an independent, in-depth study based on solid documentation, demonstrating Dichev’s skills as a professional historian. The identified shortcomings can be addressed in a future publication. The writing style is fluent and readable.

The abstract, though concise, reflects the dissertation content well, and the candidate’s academic contributions are clearly identified. His publication record—three works directly on the dissertation topic, in addition to two monographs and ten articles—exceeds the scientometric requirements.

In conclusion, I affirm that Borislav Dichev’s dissertation fully meets the criteria for a serious and professional scholarly work. My evaluation is positive, and I shall confidently vote in favor of awarding him the educational and scientific degree “Doctor.”

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